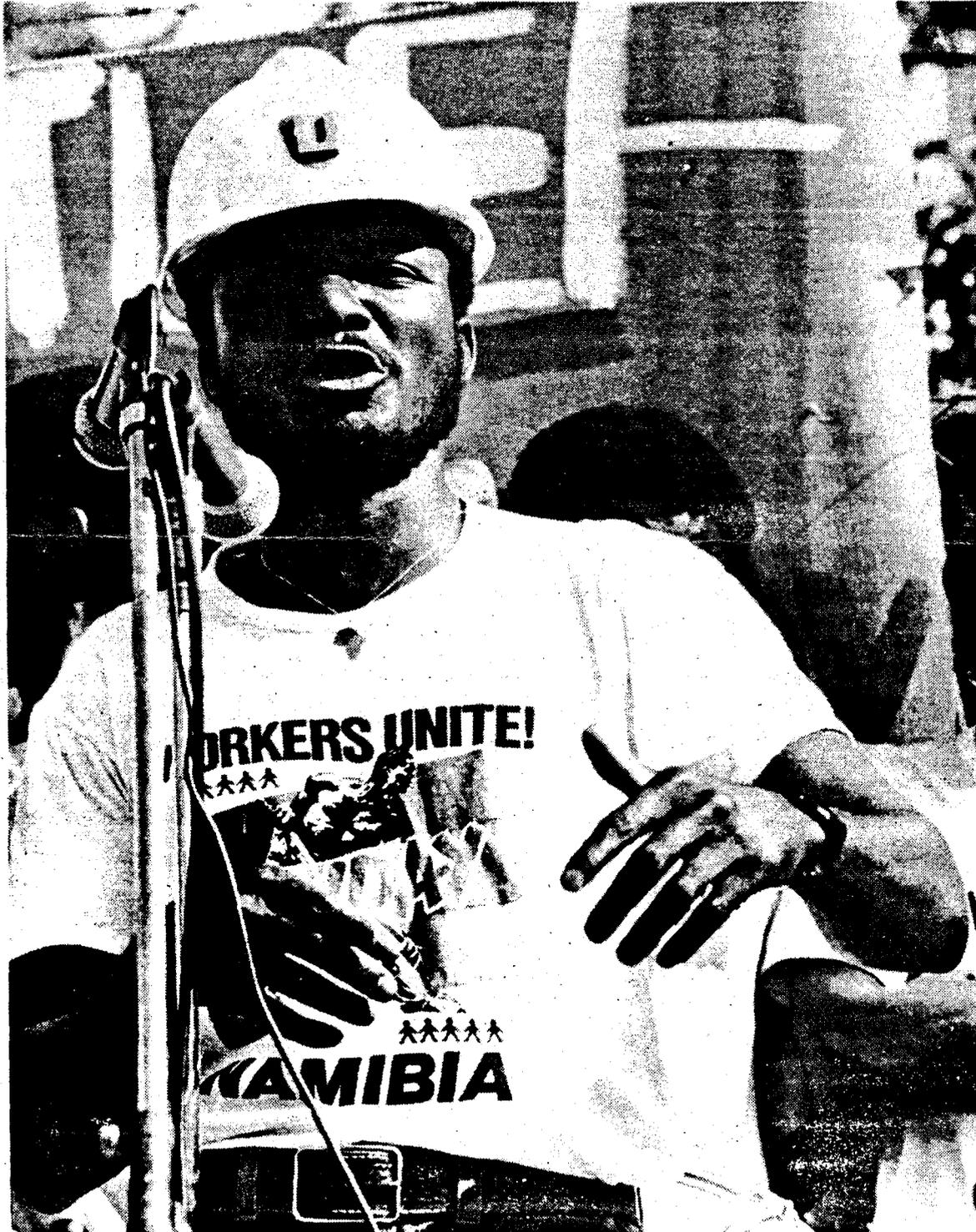




25 June 1987



Extracts of an interview with Ben Uulenga, General Secretary of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN), conducted by Brian Wood of the Namibia Support Committee (NSC) of London during a visit to the United Kingdom by Mr Uulenga in March 1987.

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Episcopal Churchpeople for a Free Southern Africa is very grateful to Brian Wood and the NSC for permission to publish this compressed version of the interview and to THE NAMIBIAN newspaper of Windhoek for the use of photographs of Mr Uulenga and from Namibia.

Mr Uulenga speaks out of the Namibian struggle for independence from the illegal South African rule of his country and from the heart of the dynamic trade union movement in Namibia. The MUN is the centerpiece of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the country-wide federation striving against South African attempts to smother its efforts, including the employment of South African Police raids, arrests of union members and Pretoria-created 'unions'.

Here are the words of Ben Uulenga - study his picture on the front cover - about his own life and the thrust for Namibian freedom.

I was born in Namibia in a village in Northern Namibia not far from Oshakati in 1952 so I'm nearly 35 years old. My father was a migrant worker at the diamond mines at the Consolidated Diamond Mines, Ltd. He is retired now. My mother works at home. I have three sisters and five brothers. The first born worked at the mines before going to Angola and joining up with PLAN - the People's Liberation Army of Namibia - of SWAPO. My second eldest brother worked on the mines but with another company now. I am the third. The younger brothers, two of them, and one sister are with the SWAPO comrades in Angola.

We are actually half peasants and half workers because of the migrant worker situation in Namibia. The peasantry took care of the food. Clothes and those type of things we got from my father and my brothers but my father couldn't really provide us with enough to eat so everybody at home except those who went to the mines stayed at home and worked in the fields. My father has a small herd of cattle and we looked after it. During summer time in the rainy season we had milk. At times of drought when some cattle died the milk was completely out.

Almost from every family there must be either two or three or four people involved as wage workers. The situation that then prevailed and still prevails in Namibia is that although those people went to various migrant work, their wages are so low that the people in the countryside didn't really depend on their wages.

Since childhood I lived a fatherless life. My father had always to be away. He used to come home for one month or two months a year and then he would go back again to the mines. The main thing he brought home were sweets, sometimes some clothes for us. We had to live with my mother only. We had to help my mother in the kitchen, attend to the cattle and the bringing of water. It's a very dry area that we live in.

The absence of my father was always on my mind and I couldn't understand why it was like that. Sometimes I wrote a letter to my father to help me with my school fees, with clothes, and my father couldn't help me in those. I started asking myself questions - why was my father really working and why, if he works, can't he provide us with the things that we needed.

At school there were student organisations. My brother got involved in these and he was arrested, although these were not really political organisations. In the early '60s we came to hear more and more about SWAPO. My father used to tell us about SWAPO and promi-



nent people who were involved like Toivo ja Toivo - what they were all about, about the migrant labour situation, and gradually we were becoming more and more aware of the situation concerning our country.

After South Africa became a republic they came and took over all the schools. Only a few remained in the hands of the churches. I was lucky to be accepted at a church school of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church, and I finished my secondary education there. I was sometimes the secretary of the Student Christian Movement and then later we had a SWAPO Youth branch; I was sometime also secretary of this. I remember those years when the International Court of Justice was still debating the Namibian issue. We got involved in writing some pamphlets protesting about the treatment we were having from South Africa. In 1972, we met some United Nations officials - a representative of the Secretary General. We were harassed. I was arrested once, first for a day, for interrogation by the South African Police.

THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1971-72

We could see at close quarters the involvement of the workers, the importance of the working people in Namibian politics. I went to Windhoek and the Sunday evening we arrived was the eve of the big strike. Monday morning the workers, most of them staying in the hostels in the compounds didn't go to work and I recall the South African army and police coming with armoured cars and surrounding the hostels. The strike went on. It was never broken. We came to see what was happening more closely and the determination of the workers struck us very deeply. We felt that every Namibian, especially the youth, should get actively involved in campaigning and working actively for independence.

The whole thing was really a sort of spontaneous workers' upsurge. I think most of the organisational work was done by workers in the fishing industry at Walvis Bay. There were people campaigning amongst the workers in Windhoek too. It just caught like fire from hostel to hostel in the whole country, the miners in the north at Tsumeb Corporation, the Consolidated Diamond Mines in the south, in Walvis Bay and Windhoek. Even before SWAPO was formed in 1960, the situation of the migrant workers had always been central to the whole issue of Namibia's political status. SWAPO actually started as 'OPO' to cater primarily to the migrant workers. The first local SWAPO committees and branches were in the hostels. The workers themselves link up everything that they do very closely with SWAPO. They were entirely SWAPO people, although they were doing it now as workers.

After school, in 1973, I went to Windhoek - without a pass. I got arrested because I did not have a pass. I was sentenced to three months imprisonment. I was later deported to Ondangua. Later I found worked with the Ovambo 'homeland' administration. I worked there for almost a year. Then in 1974, in the middle of the year, just after the coup in Portugal, I left the country through Angola and went to Zambia. This was typical not only of youth in the North. In 1972, in Windhoek, I saw a police van rounding up youngsters - 'where's your pass?'. My experience as a bit limited then. I didn't understand that this was happening to every black person in the country. This has been happening to each and

every Namibian youth. That's why after '74 so many youthful people left Namibia to join the SWAPO forces either in Angola or in Zambia.

SOLDIER IN THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY OF NAMIBIA

I went for military training with the People's Liberation Army of Namibia forces and in 1975 I was back and we started operating as part of the PLAN fighters. I was first in the East of the country, we operated from the Eastern front, and later, after Angola became independent, came to the North. I went into Namibia and after roughly one year, in the middle of '76, I was wounded in battle and I was picked up by the enemy forces. My left leg was broken. I was in fact shot twice through the left leg and hit once in my left arm and I had some shrapnel. I still have some on this side of my right temple. They were using these shrapnel bullets. They split after some distance and I was hit by the shrapnel.

I went through interrogation in the North of the country at Grootfontein at an army base and then later I was transferred to Windhoek. At Grootfontein they used to come regularly for about two months and a half. We were tortured. I was tortured. Electric shock was applied and I was generally beaten up. They were sticking these needles as they were giving me injections because of the wounds and then others were using these very same needles, sticking them in here between my nails, and asking all sorts of questions about our movement and operations. After that I was very ill. As I became better they came again for about three weeks - regular interrogation, regular torture. After that I thought they were finished with me but they captured another comrade of ours, we were together before I was captured. Our stories were very, very, completely different, so they were trying to get our stories to coincide. They brought us together and started all over again with the torture. That was the time we were physically tortured. They were black and white police and army. Actually the people who interrogated us were from the South African security police and the military intelligence of the South African Defence Force.

ROBBEN ISLAND

I was later charged, tried, sentenced and sent to South Africa to serve my sentence in prison. We succeeded in contacting the SWAPO people in Windhoek and they arranged some lawyers for us. The day of our sentence was 15th July 1977. After leaving Windhoek we went to a transit prison just outside Pretoria. There we were joined by some other South African comrades of the African National Congress and we were taken together to Robben Island. The climate of Robben Island is very damp. It's not like Namibia. The warders at that time were very unfriendly. The health care was very, very insufficient. We used to have a once-a-month chance to see the doctor. If you had a complaint you gave in your name and then you had to wait for the day the doctor arrives, and if the list is too long you would have to wait for another turn. If somebody got ill suddenly in the cell after lock up time, there is no way that he can be saved really because it takes about an hour and a half to two hours to summon the prison warders. Everybody goes off duty.

I was kept in a communal cell. The Namibians, or most of them, were staying in one section and we were about 24, sometimes more than that. All the Namibians were SWAPO members. People would go out to work. Sometimes it was only a few, sometimes there was a demand that everybody should go out. Sometimes we had to build roads, sometimes chop wood, maybe a very few times to work in the quarry, a stone quarry, a chalk quarry. At times we had to go to the sea and pull bamboos, sea bamboos, out. Seemingly they had a contract with Japan or one of those countries where they export these bamboos.

Comrade Andimba Toivo ja Toivo was kept separate from us, with people like Nelson Mandela and all the other leaders of the ANC. We could rarely meet without authorisation of the authorities. But of course we had our own ways and means.

We comrades were able to talk politics in prison. Nobody could stop us from doing that. In our discussions we concluded that, first of all, there is the necessity of the armed struggle because one slowly realises that it is only when there is real pressure on South Africa that anything can be done. The armed struggle is an essential part in all this. Then of course as much pressure as possible from the outside world. We found, especially on the Island, that the South Africans are very sensitive about what other people in other parts of the world are saying. I've seen that some of the warders on the Island, anything that comes from America, they will almost immediately feel they have to talk about it.

The people themselves must get involved both in Namibia and in South Africa. Whenever people stand up and do something you find there is a response from the outside world in forms of pressure and so on. The one thing we really tried to do on the Island was to keep ourselves updated on events. It was very difficult of course. We didn't have any records to use at the beginning - no papers, no radio. We had to organise other structures. Then later we won the right of getting papers and reading material. We had to improve our political understanding, our awareness, because only when one has that is one able to continue in the struggle and always be able to understand the situation.

When I was released I was quoted in THE NAMIBIAN newspaper as saying: 'The workers' struggle for the advancement of their interests as a class can only be part and parcel of our wider anti-colonial national liberation struggle.' From my involvement in SWAPO before my arrest and on the Island these things are always discussed. Take the national liberation movement as a whole - what kind of phenomenon is it? With us the conclusion is always that in a colonial situation you find that you have a whole community politically oppressed by a foreign power. In this oppression you find that the transnational companies always play a very important role - sometimes not very obvious, sometimes only behind the scenes. But you find that there is a direct link between what's happening politically in a colonial society or country and the economic involvement of all these people. In the struggle of the workers in a colonial situation their problems cannot be resolved outside the general victory of all the people in the country against colonialism.

Theoretically the prison authorities allowed us to have some letters a month and some visits. As Namibians we were imprisoned in a foreign country. It was very difficult for people to come and pay us visits there. A prisoner was allowed to have sometimes up to two visits. In the case of a 'lifer' they could have up to three. In our case it was almost impossible, for example, for my mother to travel to Cape Town by plane, go to the airport, arrange all those things. You find there were Namibians who had been on the Island for more than 18 years without having a single visit from their people - and no letters either.

RELEASE

I was sentenced to 15 years. I was released after about 8½ years. Since 1984, seemingly the South African authorities started to change regarding our imprisonment.



Several factors were involved. First of all, the international pressure that has always been applied on Pretoria was becoming too much for them. Also they had this situation inside South Africa. The other main issue was to give credit to the Multi-Party Conference puppet government in Windhoek. Our release came as if the puppet government did it. We were transferred to Windhoek and released in 1985.

NAMIBIAN FOOD and ALLIED UNION

On the Island we were trying to get all the information that we could on trade unions in Namibia. We read about the NUNW, we heard about all the harassment they had there. For example, NUNW had an office in Windhoek in the late '70s and then at one time the office was closed by the police and some of their office furniture, material facilities and so on were confiscated. Some officials had to leave the country, others were detained. I knew there was general harassment against the NUNW and we didn't hear much since 1980. They had gone down after the harassment. One of the things we thought about on the Island was the organisation of the workers.

There are SWAPO structures in Windhoek. The people are very active, especially at the branch level. After I was released I joined up. I studied the situation to see where I could fit in. The SWAPO Youth League branch took us in. I took part in a few meetings, some of which were disrupted by the police. I was actually arrested at some of these. Most of the people arrested at a Youth League meeting on January 26th, 1986, actually were miners. There were some from the Outjihase mine just outside Windhoek. Following our release from that arrest, we had another meeting. The question of the NUNW dormancy came up. So a committee was elected to start reactivating the NUNW. A smaller committee of field workers was elected and I was made head of that field workers' group.

We started to go out to some companies in Windhoek and the surrounding area. At some of these places you had committees initiated by the companies and these were quite useless and the workers were very unhappy with them. At other places you found that there were workers' own committees, selected by the workers themselves. They didn't have any links with committees outside their workplaces. We would discuss what they usually do if they are faced by problems. Let's say, all of a sudden, a worker didn't get his wages or his wages were cut. The workers discussed that in their committees. Sometimes you find a person would stand up on his own and demand what happened to his wages - and of course he would be dismissed or fired from his work. The workers generally agreed that some sort of organisation was necessary. We had illegal meetings because we met on the premises, without having approached management. It went well - we had quite a few committees..

By August of last year we had about 40 committees in all in and around Windhoek. Then there were about 28 committees all of which had to do with the food industries. There were people from the dairy industries, the breweries, from some Coca Cola plants, from the meat industries, and from the hotels. It was decided that there would be a big congress of the food industry workers. In September there was the launching congress of the Namibian Food and Allied Union (NAFAU). The committees we organised were not all food industry committees. There were municipality workers involved, there were miners, there were transport people, railway workers and so on. But most of the committees were from the food and related industries. The Namibian Food and Allied Union was the first union to be created.

In organising we went directly to the workplaces. Committees were elected by the workforce in each place. At the Outjihase mine, they have a hostel there, so all the workers work for one mine. We went to the hostel because here all the workers are from the same workplace.

**MINeworkERS UNION of
NAMIBIA**

After the formation of NAFAU I was assigned by our field workers committee, with the Steering Committee, to concentrate more on the mineworkers. We were still working as a team. We linked up with miners' committees at the Rossing uranium mine, at Consolidated Diamond Mines and at Tsumeb Corporation Ltd mainly. We also went to other places. Outjihase mine was one of our first. We found that TCL workers already had a very big committee. The Rossing workers even went so far as organising a



A SECTION of the crowd which attended the May Day rally in Katutura (top); in the centre, women workers;

local union. The CDM people were also going in that direction. We got some of these people together and out of our meetings there came the idea of one single union for the whole industry in the country. That's how later we had a launching congress of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia on the 23rd November 1986.

The National Union of Mineworkers in South Africa was quite helpful although they didn't really assist in the formation of MUN. Some workers from South Africa are employed at CDM at Oranjemund. The NUM people came to negotiate an access agreement with CDM and at that time they had a chance to meet our workers informally. Rossing workers also linked up with the people from South Africa. In South Africa they have a longer experience so they could sit down with our people and discuss things and give them booklets on international union federations. Links between the South Africans and ourselves are quite strong in terms of supporting each other morally and materially. National Union of Namibian Workers people were invited to South Africa by the Congress of South African Trade Unions and they stayed about two weeks with the comrades down there, gaining a lot of field experience and actually taking part in some negotiations.

The National Union of Namibian Workers and the SWAPO Department of Labour are very closely related because of the nature of our problems. As I said, it is impossible to divide workers' problems from the colonial oppression that we are experiencing in our country. The colonial authorities make laws; most of these are regarding workers and the workers have no say in these laws. What applies to the workers in particular applies to the Namibian people in general. We believe that the workers' movement can only function as part and parcel of the national liberation struggle.

In our field work we have had on many occasions got involved with the police. Sometimes we are stopped from going into places. Our approach has always been to face the police openly and tell them there is nothing that can stop us from going to organise the workers. There was a time, for example, when the police came out in force when there was a strike at one small company called Sigmark - it sells vegetables and the like - and a very small number of workers went on strike. The police kept their presence on the premises, an intimidating

force. They harassed the newspaper people from taking pictures. They stayed around there armed to intimidate us.

Tsumeb Corporation (TCL) has been promoting a 'South West Africa Mineworkers Union'. It's mainly a white collar and white miners' union; in the early '80s they started to involve blacks also. They never came to the workers, they never had meetings with the workers, there was never a discussion of strategy or what should be done, training workers and so on. They just came to the workers and told them 'we are a union', so 'start paying up and we'll help you if you have any problem'. Later the workers found that this thing is nothing at all and they stopped paying. SWAMU was stupid enough to threaten the workers with court cases. There are other organisations in Namibia calling themselves 'unions'. There is the Namibia National Trade Union (NNTU) and the Namibia Trade Union (NTU) involved in trying to lull the workers. The NTU has an office and the only evidence of its existence is that there is an office where Alpha Kanguuehi works from. They make some booklets which try to attract the attention of the Multi-Party puppet government to the situation of workers - 'the government should do something' for the workers. Ngaujake of the NNTU says they should completely dissociate themselves with politics. They have tried to meet people from Western country embassies in South Africa and have organised seminars in Windhoek and have come together with people from the Shipanga group (Andreas Shipanga holds a ministerial post in the puppet government in Windhoek) which has what they call the Namibia Federation of Trade Unions. I remember a paper from one of these seminars which said the NNTU should take a firm stand against communism - which of course one just can't see how it comes into the Namibia situation. These people are trying to lobby for international recognition. I know that Kanguuehi had some contacts with the Americans' African American Labour Centre office in Botswana. I also know that the NTU had been in contact with Americans in Brussels at the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

The workers of Namibia are still divided along the lines of colour. That division doesn't end there. It goes on to include even ethnic divisions, between language groups. At Rossing Uranium you find the workforce is divided into 17 grades, nothing else than dividing white workers from black workers. Of course they call it by other terms. Black workers have houses quite closer to the mine, they are smaller than those of whites, and the danger of radiation is greater for black workers. This is apartheid. Of course, management has some token blacks promoted to publicly high positions, but this is for propaganda purposes. Rossing is not really involved in training or upgrading its own workers. Rather they have set up this place in Windhoek called the Rossing Foundation.

It is the same with Tsumeb Corporation. Recently we went to see Tsumeb management on an issue concerning workers and the matter of training came up. They said they are contributing to upgrading workers' education, but they couldn't really point out anything! They said they sometimes subsidise the government in education, which is the last thing we want, keeping the puppet government in power. I had been in prison for over eight years on Robben Island, and when I came to the Tsumeb hostels where the workers were housed, I couldn't help noticing that conditions there are far worse than in Robben Island prison. Workers sleep on cement floors, a bit elevated, with very thin mats. Cupboards are carved out of the walls. Their tables are made of cement. They don't know such things as milk, eggs, vegetables. They get this third degree maize meal and some meat in the afternoon. The meat wouldn't be edible to me or you; it's what they call the 'abvaal' or third degree meat. The white workers live with their families in the towns close to the mine. You could find one or two black workers who are - as I said already - for show purposes. The black workers at these mines live without their families. Every hostel is a camp like a prison camp, company security guards, barbed wire. The company has full control of who enters the hostels and who is refused.

Wages for black workers at Tsumeb will be maybe 270 to 300 Rand per month (The Rand is about 50¢ US). There are wages even lower. Klein Aub is paying about 75, 100 Rand each month. Uis is paying maybe 100 to 120. Those getting the highest will be getting about 250, 240 Rand per month.

It is difficult to say which workers in Namibia have the worst conditions. I've visited railway workers who live in camps along the line. They have temporary structures and are not provided with toilets. Sometimes they are not even given food! Farmworkers! Maybe for them the problem of food is not so severe, but they don't get paid at all. They are expected to do everything and they are given maize meal monthly, some sugar, once or twice maybe the farmer will shoot some game. Some of these workers get five Rand a month. The system of paying the workers only at the end of a contract still applies. Of course then there is an argument between the farmer and the worker about what he is supposed to get. Contracts are generally for 12 months, but I think there are shorter ones, for eight months, six months.

For municipal workers there are problems such as housing. The majority of Windhoek municipal workers live in the so-called single quarters and the hostel in the Katutura township. They are very crowded places, 18 to 20 men in a four room place.

The vast majority of Black Namibian women are unemployed. Those who do work are domestic workers - 'servants' is the term used - for white households. There are some women employed in the meat industry. Employers feel that women are paid much lower than men and its better therefore to take on women. And you find women working at wholesale and grocery sellers as packers - pushing trollies and so on. Rural women work as peasants on the farms. They sustain a lot of urban people who have to obtain most of their foodstuffs from the rural areas. Some women are employed as teachers and nurses but they are very few in number. So far in the NUNW Steering Committee of 12 members, four are women. The NUNW has a policy against the oppression of women. In the constitution of the NUNW it is expressed that the aims of the organisation is to organise all the workers into their own trade unions irrespective of a person's colour, race, sex and creed.

In the Steering Committee we have people who are whites, who are 'coloured' and so on. In the mines who have members of the MUN who are white and 'coloured'. Whites who are progressive, who consider themselves Namibians as any other Namibian citizen, who move alongside us wherever we go in the struggle. You find them in SWAPO and in the unions of the NUNW. We are at present trying to bring together the committees established in the construction industry, workers on the roads, workers who build, workers in some metal factories, in machine shops, repair garages, at brick makers, the municipal workers.

We are trying to mobilise international trade union solidarity. We need resources to organise. We want public solidarity in the United Kingdom and other countries. For people to speak out on repression of any unionist in Namibia. Demonstrations against any steps which are taken to repress any workers in Namibia. And of course, taking action regarding sanctions against South Africa for remaining illegally in Namibia. Try all in your power to stop the flow of Namibian resources, such as uranium, diamonds and other goods into this country and all other countries.



GOING DOWN - Ben Uulenga goes down a British colmine.



AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL!!

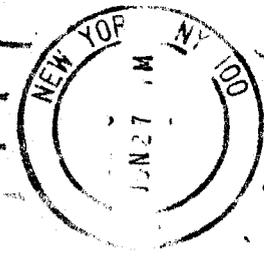
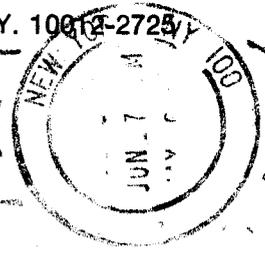


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ECSA
339 Lafayette Street
New York, N.Y. 10014-2725



Rev & Ms George Houser
Route 45
Pomona NY 10970